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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S ESF-LINKED SCHOOL VISIT GENERATES
MORE POSITIVE NEWS COVERAGE

REF: A. Ankara 912 B. 2004 Ankara 6213

11. (SBU) Summary: The Ambassador and Minister of Education visited a primary school in a poor neighborhood of Ankara February 23. The school visit was linked to the U.S. ESF grant to a project providing cash to poor families conditioned on their keeping their children in school. There was widespread and favorable coverage in both print and televised media. The photos of smiling Minister and Ambassador side by side, surrounded by children and agreeing on the two countries' shared values, provided a positive contrast to recent coverage of strains in U.S.-Turkish relations. End Summary.

Ambassador Visits School in Poor Neighborhood

12. (SBU) On February 23, the Ambassador visited the Huseyin Gullu Ceylan Primary School in the Altindag municipality of Ankara. The immediate vicinity of the school, like many neighborhoods in Altindag, has a mostly low-income population, with many recent migrants from other provinces (see ref b for a description of a previous visit to another neighborhood school). The visit was designed to highlight the U.S. \$9 million dollar ESF grant through the World Bank to the Social Risk Mitigation Project which provides cash payments to poor families on condition they keep their children enrolled in school (ref a describes signing ceremony for the grant). The visit to the Ceylan school -- selected because of the high number of project beneficiaries -- enabled the Ambassador to meet first-hand with students as well as with mothers who receive the cash payments.

Education Minister Joins In

13. (SBU) The day before the visit, Minister of Education Celik decided to join the Ambassador, thereby increasing press interest. Moreover, the Minister's evident enthusiasm, both in being seen in the school milieu and in being there with the Ambassador, helped make it a more compelling story for Turkish mass media, and provided a visual image of US-Turkish friendship and cooperation.

14. (SBU) The visit included a meeting between the Ambassador and Minister, a press conference, a chat with 5 mothers benefiting from the cash payments, a visit to a classroom, and a stop at the school's library where both Minister and Ambassador presented gift books.

Improving the story

15. (SBU) The classroom visit provided the best photo opportunity: the papers and TV featured a photo of the beaming Ambassador and Minister wedged into well-worn classroom benches, surrounded by children. Mass-circulation Sabah even included some of the Ambassador's Q-and-A with the kids: "How many children do you have?" "When you were a kid, did you work hard?" This arguably does more for the U.S. image than exchanges with the press on bilateral relations, though during the press Q-and-A, the Ambassador was able to make the point that the U.S. and Turkey shared common values and ideals, a point that the Minister agreed with. The Minister underlined the atmosphere of warm bilateral relations by volunteering that the Fulbright program in Turkey was expanding, noting that he would soon be going to the U.S. on a Voluntary Visitor program, and saying there were no tensions with the

U.S. Overall, the Minister's evident friendliness to the Ambassador, combined with the gusto with which he chatted with the project beneficiary mothers and the children, greatly added to the human interest angle for the press and conveyed an image of good bilateral relations.

16. (SBU) As a result, there was widespread favorable coverage, in both print and televised media. CNN-Turk, Channel 7, Channel D, TGRT, Channel B, and NTV all had footage of the classroom scene. Channel D characterized the visit as the U.S. Ambassador's effort to improve relations despite recent tensions. Mass-circulation newspapers Sabah, Hurriyet, Star, and Radikal carried photos with positive headlines.

Comment

17. (SBU) The Education Minister's willingness to be seen to be friendly with the Ambassador was probably helped along by his upcoming Voluntary Visitor Program in the U.S. but also by an evident new desire on the part of GOT officials to downplay press reports of problems in the bilateral relationship since Secretary Rice's visit. Whatever the motivation for the change in tone, the Minister of Education seemed willing to help make the school visit a good news story for bilateral relations. As noted in reftel, ESF funding for this kind of project can go a long way in helping the U.S. image.

EDELMAN